

The Ideal Plague

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

By

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Maude Jennings

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Maude Jennings". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "M" and "J".

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Abstract

This creative project is an examination of man's realization of death in the setting of the Black Plague. The protagonist, Basil, following the death of his father, seeks out mankind in a fervor for life. In the face of death how does man react? Should not man fill himself with brotherhood and an appreciation of life? Basil's journeys take him from London to the English countryside as he seeks to answer his own questions.

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Chapter I: The Revelation

March 3, 1349

Basil,

Your father has fallen ill from the plague and requests that you return home immediately.

Love,
Your Mother

So the letter read. Basil stood amongst the noise in the streets of London, holding the letter, alone. His hands trembled, and his head shook with the weight of disbelief. Basil's long black hair fell about his shoulders, softly caressing his neck, gentle to the touch. The plague ravished the land of England, and now his father was a victim. Basil had heard the tales of villages throughout the countryside; the dead lying in the streets; they were too many to bury. The living forgot them, lost in their own lives and too few to challenge such a task as burying the dead. The streets of London were filled with the living, rushing through the day, staring blindly into nothing.

Basil watched as the crowds hurried to their butcher shops, their bakeries, and their homes, lost to the fact that the world was dying around them. It always had been. Though now death looked man closely in the eye and pressed his pale lips to theirs. He wallowed in the air that swam around them in the streets and spit on the food that they ate. The world of the plague to some was fear, to others a nuisance. Yet others simply chose to ignore the horseman as he rode through their lands, cutting down their children and their wives; they looked blindly to their daily lives for solace.

Basil knew his father was already dead. The plague was a rapid and complete killer; it held no compassion. Basil simply looked into the colors of the setting sun and stared. The hues in the sky silently slipped away, taking the life of his father with them.

His father's life was but one color in the mural of the sky; so many others would die this day.

Walking through the streets, Basil saw no one. He saw only the life beating and breathing from the people as they hurried through their daily lives. The light was fading. How could they not see the dying of the day? To them, another burden had been lifted; another day of toil had been vanquished. Basil saw only his life slipping away in the breezes of the impending twilight, of the impending night.

"There is the flower boy, love." Said a woman dressed in stripes that stood at a corner amongst the comfort of her peers. They pranced and mocked the passersby, offering, suggesting, flaunting. The women basked in the night, a stark contrast to their vibrant visages. Their laughter split the murmurs of the street with a startling cry. You lad, a fine lady for a pretty price? You good sir, warmth for your bed? At last their eyes fell upon Basil, and their lips parted into teasing smiles, exposing the gap in their front teeth.

"Oh love, he looks so sad. A deal I'd give 'em. Come boy, something to smile for tonight?"

"Sweetie, let 'im be. One good lad in the streets is all I can spy."

"Leave 'im to me. He won't be a good lad for long." Another laughed as she flipped her skirt at a man passing by.

"Every year he sells pigs for flowers."

"Well how 'bout the striped rose right here. A blossom like mine he's never seen, I'll wager."

Basil heard not a word. He simply stared. He was lost to the throng of the streets, and his own life fluttered with the rush of each passing person. His life lay dying in the north; his father would soon be dust. Basil shook his shoulders to free them from their chill and resigned to not return. He reached into his bag and felt the cool coins against his palm. They mattered little to him. The coins were but a means to buy his blossoms, to fill his life with the beauty of the world. The sympathy of his father made him indulge his son's gentleness in this one aspect. They were a merchant family and thus had a few shillings for such a purpose.

Basil's long shirt fluttered in the wind, and his hair ruffled in the same breeze. He felt a chill that pierced his spine and iced his veins, though only for a moment. Soon he cared little for the crowd around him or the tasks they hurried to execute, if he ever had. He stared into the sky, counting the clouds. The sun splashed them with brilliance deserving of the funeral march of another day. Basil exhaled; it was a breath forever lost, and the day would soon follow.

Basil walked his horse and cart to the market where he sold them. He had no reason to hurry home. In his house, ghosts waited for him in the lamplight, breathing through the walls and slithering across the floor. They were visions branded into his eyes, inescapable. Even now, their shadows clouded his eyes, blinding him to the world around him, smothering him in their souls and the memories of his father. His father would be burned.

Basil wiped his eyes and walked through the streets, determined to leave this ugly place. In London, the dead walked, never realizing that they were but corpses that had yet to grow cold. Skeletons clinging to flesh hurried through the streets to let die another day. Basil's pale face, unlined from the inexperience of youth, wet from tears for his father, shook in disbelief. The day was now vanquished. An end now marked a beginning. The dead would now come to haunt the living.

Basil sat along the Thames, staring into the darkness and being entranced by the reflection of the moon in the waters. The river lay black in the night with a lone orb shining and rippling throughout as if to speak some masked truth. If only its tongue were not tied by the ignorance of man. The moon was full; it shined into the darkness, reveling in the shadows it created. Shadows unmask our lies. Shadows cross a smooth face, painting darkness into each crack that lies smooth in the beauty of the day. The shadows and the darkness reveal man's soul for it reveals the truth in faces and gives man the freedom to act and be lost again. Passions revel in the darkness. Lovers press closely in the night, looking into each other's eyes, accepting the faults that the shadows tell. Passion gorges itself on the freedom of the darkness, the freedom to quench our souls in the black, the freedom to love and to hate. Theft and murder wallow in the shadows and the darkness as well. The revelation of men's true souls may be forged into the point of a knife; they stab freely their evil without the day with its blinding light bound and caged. Through such passions and truths, the moon shone out. The moon is the patriarch to men's passions. Moonshine gives men freedom, for evil or good. The freedom to taste one's depths and cringe or praise, love or hate.

Basil looked into the shining orb and shook. To Basil, the moon and he both bore the heavy burden of the truth. Outside of light lay the shadows; in life awaits death. To only grasp life, to relish each day as the last, to drink and choke on the elixir of life, if only man could see truth and live it. Basil's head raised and listened to the church bells resounding from the darkness. They rang in a slow, monotonous rhythm, filling the air,

smothering the silence with their indomitable resonance. It was beautiful, a call to the devout.

“Such wonder, ring bells! Tell these fools my father has died this day, and they will soon follow. Tell them. Tell them how death takes us all. Tell them. Tell them my father is dead!”

Through his shouts, Basil had risen to his feet, and now he fell onto the street. Lying against the cold stones of the road, he sobbed. He sobbed at death as we all one day will do. He wallowed in his mistakes and his own pride against his father. His pride had lead him away from compassion and understanding and had driven him into his own wants and desires. But he saw truth did he not? If only his father had seen it, his father's compassion was his only gift, not his understanding. If only he had seen the light that pierced from the backs of Basil's eyes, the gentleness, the truth.

Basil's sobs slowly softened into a pained erratic breathing. He arose to his knees and stared at the moon. The ringing of the bells echoed their twelve tones into the night then slowly slipped away. Silence smothered the night; a calm settled across the city, if only for an instant. A flush of crimson slowly crept across the moon, painting the city in a soupy scarlet that clung to the air and to the eyes. The cobblestones turned to blood, as did the air, as did the buildings standing along the streets. The world was painted red by some unseen hand, some artist instilling the unknown and the unreal into the scene. The dull, dark town, plain in its monotony, breathed heavily in the new light. Every stone on the street and every building inhaled the new air, the red of the painted moon. The city came to life.

Basil looked about him. He looked into every crack along the street, every ripple in the slowly washing water. The light pierced deeply into the stones of the buildings and the street, deeply into the Thames, deeply into Basil. The light revealed to him the blood pumping through each, the ever-slowng pulse of the world; they all were alive; they were all dying. Basil's eyes stared into the depths of the water, frozen into a single look. Memories rushed into his mind, memories of trees climbed and sunsets seen, of cold nights and the spinning of a fevered head. The last would not leave him. His head swam in the light, slowly swaying, fighting to not be toppled. He was entranced.

Across the river shouts shattered the silence in a tumult of revelry. Men and women danced to music unheard and shouted in joy at the moment. Basil slowly turned his glance and stared through veiled eyes. The crowd was plainly dressed, peasants. Their words were just within the reach of Basil's ears, echoing their message into his mind, his soul.

"I drink to the plague, a good lad it is. The shop is closed. The night is free for us. Drink lads, drink to the plague."

"And to you good John. We drink to our lord for this night. Come drink to good John. Ha, again to lord John of the night."

"Well then, come good John, join a lady for a moment?"

"The lord shall fight the Kraken for such a beauty."

"The Kraken is here in the alley, come see."

"To the night and to good lord John who has lead us this evening. To the tavern where we will drink to the health of the plague!"

Basil fell back upon the ground laughing. He stared at the red moon that bored its light into his eyes, forcing him to see through the ordinary light of day and of the night.

Basil laughed.

“Yes good moon, I see it. Not all are blind! Not all are blind! Drink to the plague; thank God for the plague! The plague opens men’s eyes and shows them death. Let them cherish life. Let them see! Ha, yes! It has shown them, and now it has shown me. Oh beautiful world of the plague, let us love life!”

Basil lay on his back laughing as tears fell from his eyes, pooling in the cracks of the street about him. Basil had found life cherished in the skeletons. Skeletons grasping their flesh with their cold, bony claws and embracing it in their arms. A man, his clothes ragged and his face bitter with the pain of loss, passed by, carrying a dead pig. The life of the slaughtered pig stained his shirt; the blood was its precious gift to the world, to the man. The man did not understand or question; he only hungered. He frowned and walked pass. The blood from the corpse upon his shoulder spilt onto the streets, racing through the stones, creating a net of its blood, of its life.

Basil turned and stared at the blood. He watched its crimson tones turn bright in the red light of the supernatural moon. It pooled on the street and wallowed in the muck, feeding the stones, feeding the city. To Basil, it fed the mouths of those few that had awakened to their own pounding hearts. Basil stared in silence at the blood. A smile crossed his lips, and he laughed again. At last the world was awake. The beauty of life, of rosebuds and water lilies, of blue skies and white clouds, had spilled onto the ground for all to see, to know. Life bared itself to the blind. Only a few of the nearsighted had seen it.

Basil rose to his feet and trotted towards the bridge. The bridge shone plainly in the red light against the motion of the water, still and strong against the changing river. Basil laughed as he ran; he had found what his soul had always sought, those who loved life as he did. Oh, great day, at last Basil's heart is filled with blood, with the heat of friendship and the rhythm of life all around him. As he crossed the bridge, the moon slipped again into its pale white. The purity of the moon returned, showing the world in true light. Basil stepped to the street beyond and hurried toward the crowd; the moon slipped behind a cloud; he was left only with their shadows and voices to follow.

Chapter II: The Revelers

Laughter warmed the room. Basil had been welcomed as the stranger in the night that he was. The revelers had opened their arms, embraced him, and pulled him into the tavern. Basil pulled the coins from his pocket. The ale flowed.

“Good Basil, a good lad. Why have you come to London?” John asked. He was mountainous, a man who had been forged by the labors of the day, the constant exertion of the toil; his taunt muscles rippled underneath his soiled clothes. The dirt of his life clung to him even in the night, a part of him.

“To buy flowers at the market.” Basil said, without care, as if his once precious toil had been tainted by his father’s death. Basil now sought the blossoms of the tavern; company with eyes like his own that saw their own pulse flowing through their veins.

“Flowers? Why flowers while the ale is poured? Enjoy my young friend, let us drink to the plague.”

The cups of the room raised in a singular motion. A cry of devotion echoed in the room. Basil looked about him. Candles about the room flickered in the breezes of the night. The room washed like the tide as the light flashed and faded in a slow, intoxicating rhythm. Laughter filled the room with its consistency; it gave the room its true glow while a piper played his accompaniment. John, Lord John for this night, stood and sat, talked and laughed, drank and drank again. He was continuously imbibing, continuously consuming.

“Good Allison, company for my table?”

“Company to any good lord, love.”

Allison was beautiful. Her long brown hair fell about her shoulders, smooth threads of silk settling down from her delicate face. Her dress clung tightly, revealing her form, her curves that slid into an aspect of pure loveliness. Basil stared. Basil was overcome by her ease, her sweet voice as it played throughout the room, warranting attention, demanding love. To the room, she was queen, goddess of love, and Basil saw this. She was the gentle blossom amongst so many rough and grimy shafts of barley, men who toiled in the work of the day. Basil's eyes never left her; they settled into a warm admiration of the girl. The room nodded in agreement.

"Our good Basil has come for flowers, Allison."

"Flowers, love? A sweet lad, he is. Flowers for your love that waits by your fire at home?"

"No, miss. I have no such love."

"Come now pretty boy. You, such a pretty lad without love? True, your face is so smooth." Allison looked at him as her finger crossed his cheek; her voice softened into silence, a ripple of thought swept unto her forehead. She seemed to stare at him, wondering. Her eyes looked at him, then into him. A smile crossed her lips. For that lone moment Basil felt the warmth of her touch, the caress of her gentle fingertips, the soft lips against his. For that moment she stared. She laughed. Basil took a drink.

About the room, Basil saw man love mankind. Each corner, each light, each shadow was filled with a communal love, the joy of fellowship. Each man and woman had found some seclusion, some place, some love. The candles reflected into each reveler's eyes, lighting every face, burning fire into their hearts to love the night, to love

themselves, to love each other. To them, the good, the beautiful, the love of the world had been crowded into this single tavern, born for a night to gladden their aching hearts.

Basil felt the warmth. The laughter of each warmed his heart, painting the gray sorrow deep within his chest with a blood red. The warmth, the ale veiled his heart, pulling him into the revelry. He smiled. At last he had found those who understood, those who saw the skeletons. His eyes fell upon Allison as they traced the room; his nervous hand fed his mouth a drink.

“So this is young Basil, John. I have seen this lad. Yes, I have seen him. I was at the market selling my wares, you know John I am a carpenter. I had haggled a very good price, a very good price...”

“Yes, and what then, you saw young Basil?” John seemed without patience for the man as he swayed, telling his story through constant drinks taken at the pauses.

“Well, it was a very good price. But I saw him. You had a cart, selling pigs. Am I right, mate?”

Basil had been watching him, smiling. “Yes, sir. I was selling my pigs to buy my flowers, seeds, sir. I plant them at my home.”

“Swine for seedlings!” John laughed. “What a sweet young lad you are. Selling those dirty beasts for some gentle bud, some rose to grow outside a lady’s window, I’ll wager!” John had sputtered his words through his uncontrollable laughter.

Allison looked at Basil and smiled. “Pigs for flowers?” she said to herself.

John’s laughter submerged the room into a well of jollity. The room returned the deep, throaty laugh with its own. The room roared to life, fed by John, and it warmed

from it. The cups raised. The candles flickered. Basil sat laughing, uneasy, as he knew the joke was on him. Basil raised his cup.

The revelers laughed through their soiled faces. Their teeth flashed sparse and yellow in the candlelight, denying their purity, displaying the truth they all sought to lose at the bottom of their cups. Lost, their heads swimming, they laughed at another day, another hardship conquered, and lastly they thanked the plague at every cheer. "The plague, he's a good lad!" "God bless good, gentle plague!" The plague gave them freedom, gave them knowledge. The plague made them valuable to their lords, a commodity in dwindling supply. They, at last, felt the power so long hidden from them, stolen from them. They held England in their palms, these peasants, and for each who died their grip grew stronger. "God bless the plague!"

Basil saw them all, joyously drinking. Their faces hard from the day, they played in the night, lost in the shadows. The candlelight shining throughout the room only deepened the shadows, pulled them along the walls, caressing faces into a relaxed and open aspect. Each man, each woman grew glad at the night, at the ale. They fell in love; they rejoiced. The plague gave them the right to live each day, to know each day, to drink of it, choke of it as they jealously imbibed in it. Then, they would drink of it again, celebrating that they had lived another day. So life went for them.

Basil felt their love. Each one a friend, Each one was a dear cousin, long lost, who had returned home. Let them celebrate. Let them cheer each cousin, a drink for each cousin, a drink for the plague!

"And where are your blossoms now, good Basil?" Allison asked, a smile upon her lips.

"The most blessed blossoms are but in this room, my dear Allison, and you the most lovely."

"Oh, a sweet lad. Surely you've seen many blossoms as fair as I."

"No sweet Allison, you are the single rose in the garden. You are quite unique, I assure you."

Allison laughed as she stared. Basil relaxed into his chair as one arm fell limply to his side, free to wander, to rest amid the love of the room. The other lifted his cup.

"Lord John, Johnny Plague, a dance?" A woman said. Her worn face creased into a smile, age and labor had scarred her, slowly draining what comeliness she had ever possessed away. The smile was tentative, a hope, a prayer to leave this day for another, to live in youth again, to wallow in its life, to gorge in its passion.

John rose, slowly, unwillingly, his eyes falling on Allison as he stood. They moved off; the piper played alone. His notes began to flood throughout the room, mixing with the laughter, weaving a tapestry of sound, the sound of man indulging in life. The piper was the fortunate, lost in the notes, lost in his truth; he was lost in the notes that spilled from his heart, playing close-eyed, enraptured. Within the music he found peace; in the music only, life danced upon the notes, upon the night. The melodies and the harmonies wove into a great tapestry, a tapestry without beginning or end, only truth. The piper's head swayed; he had forgotten the toil, the labor, the hardship, and saw only the beauty. John frowned.

They walked away and began the dance. He in a lost and passionless motion while she, yearning, moved swiftly, gladly, ignoring John's own half-hearted steps.

"Does the lad dance?"

"Well, yes, of course." Basil stumbled upon the words, unsure. The ale swam in his head.

Allison and Basil rose, walking amongst the dancers, into movements and motions as they pronounced their intentions. They moved together, a single motion, a single rhythm, swiftly moving about the expanse of the room, following the piper as he played. They were youth; the older women looked jealously to them, hoping to steal some of their passion, wishing for another day as the young. The dance worked aggressively then slowly, following each tune as the piper changed his mood, changing the mood of all who followed him. The tavern was drunk upon his notes, drunk upon the beauty he let them taste and touch, if only for a moment.

Not a word was spoken. Basil and Allison moved about in understanding, both realizing the music as youth most often does. They saw and heard what others could only hunger for, dream of. The passion of youth swelled between them; it intertwined them into each other's soul, giving a glimpse of truth; the truth that only the piper could tell.

"Oh, the young, look at them. That was me, I promise ya."

"Perhaps in good Adam's day." One woman scoffed.

"Look at them, showing off; they make my bones ache."

"Ache in envy, you old bag." Another laughed.

"Lovely, they truly are lovely."

So the conversation about the room went. Basil and Allison only heard the music, and it soon faded into distant rhythms, distant sounds, leaving them free within their hearts. The music ceased.

"The piper has played his final tune." The piper said as he raised his ale. The crowd followed in praise and thanks for the moment he had given them.

"Walk a lady home, Basil?"

Basil gave his arm, warmed by her smile; his own upturned lips responded. They walked into the night, chilled by the early spring air, warmed with the other's company. John's head turned as they escaped through the doorway.

The cool night air hugged around them, pressing them closely into the warmth of each other, melding them into a single, huddling heat. Basil looked into Allison's eyes; they somehow had changed. Within the night they seemed seductive, no longer the gentle warmth he had known in the tavern. Shadows ran across her face, playing on the curves of her beautiful smile, painting a permanent smirk upon her lips.

"And where does sweet Allison wish to be led this night?"

"Follow me, young Basil." The smirk remained.

They walked through the night. The moon lit the streets into a pale, dull effervescence as they walked. The moon was full, telling its most painful truth, showing all that it may know with its full orb. Basil and Allison pressed closely together; her head rested upon his shoulder. Footsteps could be heard echoing upon the cobblestone street behind them; they pounded in a desperate and intentional hurry. Basil did not notice as he stared into Allison's dark eyes. Her eyes seemed to deepen and enflame in the shadows, mistresses of the night.

In the shadows she seemed to find peace. The shadows offered freedom, as they do to all; they offered the escape from the world that she sought. They offered her a veil to pull across the eyes of the world; a veil that concealed her from the morality of the common man and let her dance freely within her own delights. Allison smiled.

She pulled Basil close to her; she raised her head as she gently pressed her lips to his. Basil felt the blood rush into his cheeks; his heart pounded quickly and then more quickly as the blood fed his emotions, his wants, his desires.

"Come Basil, my home is just down this alley."

Basil peered into the alley, pondering. The alley pulled the shadows within, allowing them, the shadows, to be free; it was a place of freedom; the place where the shadows themselves longed to play and dance, to wallow and feed. In this hollow, whisking in unrestraint, the shadows beckoned to Basil, tempting him, promising to him. Basil felt the tightening of his chest as he nodded, as the footsteps behind them grew closer and stopped.

"Allison, a word." John's voice came from behind them, tightened into control; it was a futile attempt to hide his jealousy, to blanket it in the calm of rationality. His worn face wrinkled into his restraint.

"John, followed us all this way? Come dear Lord, I think you belong with that fine lady, your dance partner." Allison said. Her voice was teasing, playful. It pulled at the strings of John's heart, possessing the power of the puppeteer. John was helpless, lost within his own emotions that consumed him, that burned into a fiery pyre within his chest. The flames engulfed his chest, reddened his eyes, and lashed from his mouth upon his tongue, uncontrolled and fierce in their desperation.

"Alone with me is where you should be this night. You know where you belong. Now come."

Allison's eyes flashed into anger as her face turned pale. Her mouth opened slightly as her forehead curled into thought, into disbelief, into fear. Her eyes fell upon Basil who stood motionless, pondering the words that had been spit from John's mouth. Basil grew angry, hateful toward this man who dared speak so basely to this sweet girl.

"John, good Basil has offered me the kindness of walking me home. You should return to the tavern or the field where you belong, perhaps the pigs will sleep with you tonight!"

Basil stepped away at these words. His eyes searched the streets, peering into the moon's light, desiring some truth, some word denying the defiance of Allison. She spit her venom at John as he stood infuriated, overcome by his anger. John turned away, throwing his hands into the air. He returned his gaze to her.

"Come now, good Allison. I beg you." John's voice painfully softened into a false sincerity, a false warmth. It softened into warmth he had never known; he had only placed it across his lips as a convenience, as one would a mask to hide his face. The mask was perhaps of a gentle lover, of a lady, of so many things that the adorer only plays at, pretends to know, never understanding.

"You John, shall never know me again. Be gone with you. I am not your whore. I only live to love, and you I love no more. Come, my sweet, let us leave this beast to his beasts." She said as she turned to Basil.

Basil only stared at her, wondering at her sharp tongue, her openness, her wantonness. Allison was a child of the night to him; she was a child of the moon,

wallowing in the freedoms of the night. Yet could this be? Basil's face contorted into frustration and disbelief, lost to the questions that tore at his mind, burrowed into his eyes and clouded his thinking.

"Tonight you will come with me Allison as you should." John growled as he grabbed her by the arm.

"Tonight, like any other, you or any other man..."

John's hand crossed her cheek, taking away her thoughts, the breath that she had hoped to shape into a serpent's tongue. Her head wrenched as she fell to the ground. She fell as if sitting down, her dress spun around her into a spiral, a rosebud that hugged against her frame, her form. She sat without motion, without a word.

John's eyes raised and looked at Basil who had watched in disbelief. The warmth that had hugged him, rustled through his gentle hair, had now been ripped from him. He stood cold, shaking, his head nodded back and forth as his thoughts escaped him, betraying him, allowing him nothing with which to defend, nothing to speak or utter; they left him only with the words of Allison, "You or any other man".

"I'm gone. I'm gone." John said as he walked out of the alley, out of the shadows. John stepped into the air of the street and turned his head about, looking about him, his anger left his chest heaving, his hands shaking. A laughing voice came from the street outside of the darkest shadows, outside of the alley. Basil could hear John in the street as he began to laugh with a friend who had been walking home. Even in the merest light of the moon, John felt restrained, held responsible, where his face became a visage of joviality, but in the alley, he was free and full of hate.

Allison silently stood, tears staining her cheeks, pausing for a moment as if to speak but only placing her hand upon her mouth, and walked away as Basil stared into the opening of the alley, into the moon's light. The shadows wrapped the alley in darkness; they were not merely night but shadows from the moon's light that huddled into this dark place, this chasm of freedom, a place without restriction, in that it was pure.

Basil slowly walked out into the light, out into the face of the moon, his head shaking. Basil thought of the horror of the slap, the piercing of Allison's words; they held no love, no fellowship, only the desire to feed one's pleasures, one's own needs. Basil was now lost. Man had thanked good plague with sin. They had knowledge and had been corrupted by it. Allison's words echoed in his ear, "you or any other man". She had slipped her poison into Basil's breast, killing his purity, destroying the love he had so long wished to share; he was left with disbelief and the words of Allison echoing in his ear.

Chapter III: The Chosen Path

The English rain fell silently, lazily; it was a slow, gentle sway that filled the sky, speckled a man's clothes, and wet his hair. Basil was the lone traveler. His legs stepped in a somber and slow rhythm. His face was downturned, hiding from the rain, hiding from the world around him. His mind remained steady, lost in the words of the previous night in London. To him, the English countryside was but a blur, a streak outside of his narrow vision, his narrow tragedy; it was a painting of watercolors streaked and running free as the rain settled upon its canvas.

Following Basil's night of revelry, he had left the great tumult of London; he had been forced from the city by the relentless chase. Each voice that echoed the streets, each cart that rumbled, each child that cried out in the night while Basil aimlessly wandered took him back to that moment, to the slap upon the face of Allison, to the words that had been spewed that night. Basil somehow felt lost, a child in the dark woods. The rain fell around him as his mind, his emotion, sought to find some new ideal, some new understanding with which to live by. Had not the plague brought this most wondrous time? Basil had once thought so.

Once he had danced in the streets at the wondrous truth that he had thought he shared with all. The truth had been lost through the amber light of beer reflecting the candlelight. The amber light had brought only jealousy, selfishness, impurity without reason. They had corrupted great plague and all that he had given him.

The hills rose upon each side of the walking path, a path worn by peasant's feet and horses hooves. The green of the hills became dark, somber in the running earth; they became worn and brown. Basil walked silently; he walked east. Basil had resigned to not return home for some time and London had been ruined for him. He chose east; it

was as good as west or south. He had been walking for many hours, endless hours they seemed, before he came upon a cross, an intersection, a choice. It was from the north that she came. The rain matted her hair, and her dress pressed against her as tightly as skin while her cloak fluttered in the wind.

Basil seemed not to notice her; he only stood and pondered over nothing. He was heading to no particular destination and thus each turn offered a seemingly comparable opportunity. Basil was lost.

"Hello good sir. Oh my, I said hello good sir. Lost are we?" She had raised her voice over the rain, over the thoughts that ran through Basil's head, over the low-lying fog that lumbered in his eyes. "I said hello good sir."

Basil turned his head.

"I do apologize, miss. I was, well, I was merely deciding which path seemed the most fair. It matters little, I suppose."

"I guess the only path you need is the one that takes you to where you want to be. And where is that?"

"No where. Perhaps to a woods or a cottage for the night or perhaps home. It matters little."

"Well good sir I am about to head east. If you like, you may join me."

"Does it seem appropriate for a young miss to walk alone?"

"It is appropriate if God and I choose, and we have. Now, you may join me if you like. I must go."

Basil stared at her. Her eyes were warm and soft, or so he thought. He trusted himself little, his ears even less, and his eyes not at all. She had come upon him a lone

specter in the mists of the heath, a lone light within the dreariness of so dark a scene.

Perhaps he should go with her. Perhaps she was the kind, the fair, the one who loved the world openly and purely, perhaps.

"For what purpose do you go east?"

"I go to attend my church sir; we enjoy the peace of the night, the holiness of the darkness. I go to pray with my fellow man for they are the ones that God has chosen. It is time. It is time for me to take to them the truth. My dear friend Peter, I must take away. Though they are confused, they are good people. Will you come with me?"

Basil paused. It was the choice that had been shown him best.

"I believe that I will."

The sun had begun to set though the travelers were unaware, ignorant in the blanket of the clouds. The masses of collected raindrops fell about them in rain, in mist. Each droplet was birthed upon the face of the cloud, upon the face of their world, held for a moment and released into a dark landscape, torn from the bosoms of their mothers. Basil saw this as he stared at the sky. How little time to dance in the clouds. The droplets were but a moment then lost upon the ground, dead. Basil laughed. Even the sky brought death; did the droplets see the grass before they shattered upon it? He could.

"Why did you laugh just now?"

"Did I? I apologize. One should never laugh alone. I was merely laughing at the raindrops as they fell from the sky."

"I see, most amusing. Well, I have had not the politeness to introduce myself, and I believe the raindrops stole your attention, so I am Mary."

"And I am Basil."

"And why were you in London, young Basil?"

"How did you..."

"You are on the road from London."

"Oh, of course. I was there to... I was there to sell at the market. My father is a merchant."

"I see and lovely weather for a light stroll into the countryside."

"Well, actually, I had resigned to leave London for the countryside. I enjoy the calm of it."

"Calming it is, I agree."

At last, Basil allowed his eyes to trace the sight of Mary. Her eyes glowed with a peace, a calm; her cloak fell around her now, only occasionally fluttered by the breeze. The cloak fell about her body without care, without apprehension; it fell gently about her, understanding her. Her smile opened upon her lips as Basil looked at her, her teeth shone brightly against the dark landscape while her brow held motionlessly in a tight and serious manner. To her, she enjoyed life, loved it, but she knew of something more, of some far off land promised to us all. She hoped to one day travel to just this place. She continually prayed, asked for forgiveness, as if in a constant knot of reminding the innkeeper that she would like the room at the end of the hall.

"How far is this church you spoke of?"

"Tonight, we shall pray underneath the stars, in the open as God intended. We must love God in both his house and in his field, in his woods and in his cave. Tonight it is the field, good Basil."

Basil looked to her, smiling. Her eyes sparkled in a cheerful understanding, a cheerful calm. She had made her peace, calmed it nightly, and walked through the day offering her fellowship to the world. God was her sovereign, and she wished to serve him.

As they walked, the rain ceased. The speckles of droplets that had shrouded them in mist, that had huddled around them in a blanket of fallen clouds began to slow and cease. The clouds paused above them, looking to the earth below, saddened at their inevitable departure, at the close of their purpose. At last, they parted. The last shafts of once shrouded sunlight fell upon the two as they stepped through the damp and puddled landscape. The earth had been washed with the life of the rain, reborn through the raindrops that had fallen across its face. The droplets slowly disappeared from the puddles; they would endure a moment longer but soon would be lost and forgotten. Only the earth that they fed would remember, but only until the next such feeding when their memory would be replaced by a fresh and new gratitude.

The sun itself began to fall away behind the horizon to rest, to again yield to the moon as she raised again, empress of the night, queen of truth. Voices resounded beyond the path, beyond the trees. The earth listened as they floated by. Basil raised his head and allowed his ear to grasp the whispers, to listen to the words as they floated upon the cool air of a spring evening. His eyes turned to Mary.

"Yes, they have begun, good Basil. Such wondrous and pious people they are. I will join them shortly. Of course, if you care to join us you may." Mary looked to him, sad at her own words, searching through Basil's heart. Somehow her words were only hopes, wishes for those she spoke of; she knew truth; she hoped Basil knew as well.

Basil's eyes looked to Mary and nodded. The voices to him seemed a call to all, a desire to share the world with another, the desire to praise God with another. The fellowship he could taste upon the moist air around him. He could see that circle of voices rising into one note, one harmony that called out to all that they may understand. No judgment lay upon those wondrous voices. It was a universal call to man, to woman, to child, to the world. Basil's hopes swam in these delusions, in the waterfall of the voices. His aching heart desperately sought some peace; he hoped the voices told the way.

"Those voices, they call to all. How could I deny such a tender invitation?"

"Perhaps, you will join us then?"

Basil nodded.

"Wonderful, good Basil. Tonight, I hope you will find your piety with us."

Basil watched as the smile again crossed her face, a gentle joy that came to life upon those lips. Her eyes twinkled with compassion, with hope, and as the sun set, with mystery. Deep within the shadows lay some tale, some truth, some astonishment that ached at Basil's heart, at his mind, at his soul. Mary seemed to hold some secret, some truth of her own from the world. Her eyes glowed with the calm of it, with the peace. Mary saw the inevitable of the night, of the scene, of the task. She sought to save. Her secret she carried with her until it would open into the world, perhaps a rose bud, perhaps a vulture's beak.

Chapter IV: The Fiery, Fiery Night

They rose over the hill that had followed them along the left of the path. In the distance, flames flashed against the darkness of the sky, masking the stars, the moon, the night from the scene. The choir sang, as if in a whisper. The flames seemed to rise and fall with the pitches of the pious voices, moving with the breezes of the hidden night, reverberating with the earth that lay beneath their feet.

"Come, Basil. My friends are waiting." Mary smiled as she spoke, a warm welcoming smile filled with reassurance. Her eyes looked to the distant scene. There, the secret, only a glimpse, a glimpse in the reflection of fire in her eyes.

"Yes, Mary, of course."

Basil followed her as she walked. Her steps were sure; her purpose was undeniable. Basil watched as she worked her way to the crowd, rushing as if the world might end just as she began her final steps into the light. Basil followed, reluctant but curious. Perhaps these Christians would show him some beneficence, some good will that once seemed so apparent in the world of the plague.

"Good Mary, we have been waiting. We feared you may have become lost in the night." A man said as he stared at the ground, only looking up for recognition.

"Peter, God led every step of my journey as he does in life, if you let him. I have found a new world, a new beginning, and you shall join me. Tonight you as well will at last find the true path. We shall leave this place for a brighter one, a happier one. Come let us sing with the others."

Mary raised her hand to Basil, offering it in gentle fellowship. The three walked to the circle. Two sang. Basil could only close his eyes and listen to the calm. The

voices whispered into his ears, offering hope, offering answers. The wind rustled the limbs above him.

As Basil opened his eyes, he could see a village in the distance, contrasted to the light of the blaze in the midst of the circle. It lay a rather short distance into the night but was almost entirely lost in the darkness. These good folk had not wandered far. The town sat in the darkness, illuminated only by the stars and the moon yet somehow seemed horrid. The celestial light shone on the cottages, pulling from them only their most vital planks, thatch, and reflections. The light painted it into a place of death. The cottages seemed torn and tattered in the moonlight. Only this plank shone in light, only this strand of thatch paled in the shadows. The darkness amongst so little light pulled skeletons from the flesh, old, tired bones long dead, only the flesh clung, praying for salvation.

"Sing Basil. Sing with me."

"I must apologize my good Mary. I do not know the words."

Mary laughed at this. She placed her arm in his and sang all the louder, offering her own strength to his weakness, her own knowledge to his ignorance. Her voice rose above the choir, a sun amongst so many stars. Purity cupped its hands around her lips, strengthening her words. Basil shivered for a moment. The heat of an arm in his brought only memories, painful reminders of a lost reality. It brought the heat of Allison into his breast, the cloud of ale to his eyes. Where the warmth of Mary's arm calmed, Allison's arm had burned. The singing ceased to a slow softening. Calm's tranquil silence was then shattered into a tirade by a voice that began to bellow.

"This Great Plague that has befallen, why has it come?" A man named Paul stood in the center of the circle, speaking with furious, intense emotion. He was small, frail; his

worldly form had betrayed the ferocity of his heart. His passions and his ambitions towered to the skies; his frame bent in the wind, weak, 'Why has it befallen us you ask? The Lord has come to show man the true light, to punish the unbelievers, to release the good from the torment of this world. I say punish them! (The crowd echoed, Punish Them!) We have come here the saved. Let us not forget; let us not stray.' Paul's eyes peered into the crowd, 'Peter, have you strayed? Tell me, have you strayed? Look at me Peter; do not stare at the ground; do not stare to Satan. Have you strayed?'

"Yes, Paul, I have strayed." (He has strayed!)

"Then fall on your knees and beg for forgiveness. (Beg for forgiveness!) Do you smell it? Death waits for us all, each man, each Lord, each peasant, each woman, each child. None are safe!"

Peter dropped to his knees, his head never rising from its gaze to the ground.

Basil looked at Mary as the crowd bolstered its emotions into frenzy; a frenzy that grew fierce and heated; the fire grew pale in fear. The rampages of the demagogue had shattered the whispering of the voices, of the song. Mary seemed almost lost to the words; her eyes looked past Paul and into the darkness, as if some angel calmed her with its smile from the shadows. The fretting of the shouts, the torment of the hearts seemed only reflections to Mary, twisted reflections that rippled within a stream. Though they held some truth, they were molded into something unreal, meaningless. She seemed to ease into the shadows that nestled around her, tranquil within the dimming twilight.

"Who has not lost a child to this Black Death? A family? (We all have.) And you are the chosen, God's own sheep. Dare not flee the flock into the darkness. Only the wolves await you, the claws of Satan! Will you stray? (We shall not stray!) Will you

bow down to the Lord! (We will bow!) Then bow my gentle children. Bow with me in prayer."

Paul knelt to the ground, bellowing out his prayer, ensnaring the hearts of the people into his net of fear. The congregation squinted into their deep devotion. Their eyes pinched into tense exertion, into passionate prayer. The fire flickered as they kneeled. The crowd was lost in emotion, drowning in a well of their own fear, the fear of death. No one prayed for salvation, for peace, for the riches of the afterlife. Each man, woman, and child prayed for another day, another hour in which to breathe life into the hollow shells of their rib cages.

Basil stood. His eyes searched through the circle in astonishment; his chest trembled from the words of Paul, from the frightened whispers that echoed in his ears, into his shaking head. Fear brought only a wanton desire for each to nourish his own life. Prayer to them was as necessary as their daily bread. They did not lead; they only followed. Each face in the crowd became lost to his own salvation, to his own free will; they became but the sheep of Paul who had stood in the center, yelling furiously to whoever would listen. Basil, exhausted of the scene, stared into the woods that rose outside of the ring.

The trees seemed distant, separate, as if they were some painting placed outside of the circle; they did not belong. Neither did Basil. Mary continued to stare into the darkness, nodding in approval to some unknown speaker, some unknown companion. She seemed lost to this world, only looking to a new one. Basil smiled at her peace; she seemed to have found her truth. A truth that lies outside of these people; it was all her own.

"Now my friends, let us bring the voice of the Lord to our good town. Let us fill it with the love of God and save ourselves for another day from this most horrid plague. (Let us be saved!)" Paul peered at the crowd as a smile crept onto the corners of his mouth.

In fact, Paul loved the plague, cherished it. His sheep clung to him as children in the night as the wolves howled from the darkness. Pray he would tell them. Pray for your immortal soul. They would pray; they would look to him for salvation. He had given it. Yes, many had died; he had sit by many beds as the dying shrieked at the face of death as it loomed over them. Paul remained alive; to him, he was chosen by God to protect and to give peace to his flock. Paul looked to the sky and grinned. Oh, good Plague, will you make fools of us all?

"You, lad, run ahead and build the fire." The boy ran from Paul into the darkness of the town.

The circle fell in upon itself, pushed together by an overwhelming sense of communion. The face of each as they walked was tormented, soiled. The people of this small, lost town paid homage to their God, begged for his mercy, looked jealously for his divine forgiveness. They guarded this small speck of civilization from the invasions of the world, from the invasions of the plague. Though it still found them. Basil walked outside of the group. He watched the people; he looked for some reassurance that they had indeed found peace, though their appearance displayed the truth; he looked for Mary.

Mary had strayed from the flock. Her own deep spirituality pulled her away from the path and into the blades of grass and the shelter of the trees. The moon painted a dull shroud of light about the leaves, about the limbs, about the trunks. Mary stared up to the

silver sky and watched as the wandering clouds moved in one slow motion, one slow breath. The clouds climbed upon one another, rolling into a single wisp of gray, blending together; they formed one single life, one single world in the sky, all understanding their place within it. Mary smiled.

Basil began to separate himself from the flock. He kept to the shadows. Basil stepped from stone to stone looking at the faces that stared with glazed eyes at some destination that the shepherd herded them toward. The sheep knew not where to go, how to get there; they knew only to follow the word, the word of Paul. As they walked, they dared not speak. Paul stoked the fire of God's wrath deep within their souls; he nourished it, suckled it, knowing that it gave him strength. Paul could not read Latin.

Could they not see? Oh these poor souls lost within their own blindness. Was Paul's grip so strong, the blindfold so tight? Their fear swelled each day, swelling more each day. The plague stole their children; it stole their wives and their husbands. The priest died long ago. Another had not been sent. Paul alone held the reins of their divine destinies, leading them with blinders, keeping them on his straight and narrow path. Paul bred the fear inside them; it was growing sinfully hot, too hot for this world.

Basil walked along the town's edge; he dared not enter. The town lay in some nether region, cloaked within a transparent shroud felt only by the soul. The soul shrank from it, cried out in agonizing pleas for mercy. Some hate, some terrible beast lay just beneath the streets, just beneath the cottage floor. His soul could feel the beast as it turned in its sleep. Basil stood at the edge where a line ran distinctly as dirt became grass. Basil stood with his back to the lush life of the forest, to the openness of the world and stared into the weight that hung over this small town. Basil turned and walked away.

Basil's chest pulled him from the town, pulled him into the woods, into the seclusion. Basil had lost Mary. He walked from the town resolving to never return to such a dreadful place, to such a bastion of fear and lost piety. Basil thought to himself as he walked; his head ached with the birthing pains of a fever; it swelled beneath his skull, clouding his eyes. Random thoughts filled his mind, meaningless, only images of flowers growing and dying, rising and falling, in a ceaseless, monotonous circle. Pigs fell about them dead. They rotted. Their bodies, ingested by the worms of the earth, soon decayed into the ground. The flowers then arose.

Basil shook his head, meaningless. To him, his fatigue had drowned his head into delusions; the rain had blurred his thoughts into puddles. As Basil walked, he only circled the village, held by its grasp, held by the beast as it shook the sleep from its head and began to claw the dirt away to rise. As Basil walked he heard the breaking of a branch. The quick snap demanded attention; perhaps it was Mary.

Basil peered into the darkness, the darkness that lay in the shadow of the village. A man stood, pulling himself within his ragged coat, hiding his face beneath the broad hat that sat upon his head. The man was frail, weak and constantly looked about him, slowly then quickly, in a nervous and fearful apprehension. At last he stepped to the well that sat beneath the cover of a tree and dropped the two pails that he had been carrying.

Basil walked toward this man, quietly, not wishing to frighten him or to feed his agitation. The bucket was lowered upon a rope into the depths of the well, into the darkness.

"Friend, let me help you. I see you have two pails and I think they will be quite heavy once filled."

The man's head snapped to stare at Basil's smiling eyes. The man could sense Basil's warmth, his fellowship; he became calm.

"I am sorry sir but you startled me. Thank you for your kindness. My name is Isaac."

"And I am Basil."

Their voices carried through the darkness as the bucket splashed into the water at the bottom of the well. The town sat in silence. The pious fear of the crowd had left the village vacant of all voice, of all sound. Paul was waiting for an instant, a flash of the flame, a calling of a crow, something to focus fear. Paul's flock had heard the voices, and one sought these strangers in the night.

A man walked toward them; his steps were forceful and filled with purpose; he would find the voices.

"You I remember from our service but you I do not know. What is your business here sir?"

"I, I only came for water. I hoped to find a little for my family for we have traveled far this day." Isaac's lips sputtered out the words, hesitating through his trembling.

"Well then sir, perhaps you will join our fellowship this night. We have built a fine fire now in the middle of our small village. We shall now close our service; it will not take long."

Isaac's face twisted with the struggle in his mind, the struggle that poured out beads of sweat from his cheeks and crossed lines of thought across his face. At last, his face fell into a forced and unwilling decision. "I cannot, for it is not my faith."

"And what is your faith?" The man peered closely into Isaac's eyes, holding his lamp to the melancholy face. "You are a Jew. Why have you come?" The man's voice growled into the face as it shook. The voice carried to the others. The man grabbed Isaac and pulled him into the town, into the light that now bellowed from the flame in the center.

"I have no quarrel with you. I only came for water for my family. Please sir, a gentle Christian I would hope would let be."

"Quiet!"

Basil followed the two. His steps were slow, unwilling to admit the horror of the man, unwilling to enter the town, unwilling to confront the beast. At last he came to the dirt, the edge of the town. Basil stopped. His hands shook with the fear that arose from his chest, from his soul. His head pounded with heat, with his struggle. He could not enter such a horrid place; he could not bear the breath of the beast as it belched from its lair. He dared not enter the den of damnation.

"This Jew I found nosing around the well."

Paul's eyes met the pair as they came into the light of the fire. For an instant, a smile passed across his lips and disappeared. He stood to speak.

"A Jew! Have we toiled in misery, my friends, have we worked so hard to protect our quiet village only to have it invaded by this man? The plague has many faces. One face lurks in our wells. The Jews poison us with our own cups as we drink. We have all seen the dying; we have all seen them as they melted away in a single night. Lost forever. For too long this sickness has ravaged our lands. My own good brother saw a Jew by his well. He welcomed the man, fed him. He allowed him the use of his well

through Christian charity. My brother died the next day. My brother William was a good man. Peter will tell us of William."

"William was a good man; he died in a single night." Peter said as he stared at the ground.

"Yes, my brother was a good man, and he died by the hands of Satan's own; he died by the hands of a Jew! By the hands of a man he had offered his kindness. We have all heard of the Jews of our great land poisoning wells. In a mass force they seek to destroy us, to rid England of its most pious Christians. How can we let this continue?"

Isaac looked from face to face as the fear tore open the hate in their eyes. The pious parishioners forged their fear into the flames of hate, the flames of death. Each one had seen the plague, pulled at his cloak as he stole their mothers from them. Yes, their fear grew to hate. Isaac could only look to the darkness, look for some deliverance, look for Basil. Mary arose from the shadows, drawn by the hate that dissipated through the air.

"Let this man be. The plague is our punishment; it is the punishment we all have earned and deserve. No Jew brought this upon us, only ourselves. Let this man be." Mary's voice shattered Paul's singular vice as she walked into the light. Her face was flushed in anger. Her fire, her passion had at last arisen from the depths of her soul. Mary saw truth; she saw the face of death and laughed. All must die.

"You defend this man? You will defend him, Mary whom we have given our love? He is the sickle of Satan. He has come to cut us from the earth as the farmer does his wheat. He has come to cut us down and devour us at his table. How can you defend this?" Paul's face grew into the twisted pains of perceived betrayal. He had given Mary

guidance, and she only sought to steal his power, to blind his people, to make them stray from God's chosen path, Paul's chosen path.

"He is only a man. We cannot blame him for our own plague. God has judged us. We all will one day die and face our judgment, better now. If we are pious we have nothing to fear!"

"We have watched as our children became stained from the touch of Satan's plague, their bodies black from their own blood. Can we let this agent of Satan live? (Never!) Can we let him spit his venom into the mouths of our children? (No!) Then let us destroy this demon, as God would ask of us. No, he would demand each one of us perform his Christian duty and destroy this evil! (Destroy it!)."

Basil watched as the crowd frenzied into an uproar of hate. The flames danced upon their words, their shouts, as they echoed into his ears. Basil saw Mary. She screamed to calm, urged them to offer life in the midst of death. Her voice was lost in the storm of fear as it rumbled its thunder into the throats of the mob. She was grabbed by the arm, pulled pleading from the scene. She had found her secret; she had found her peace; it was lost in the downpour of hate that roared around her.

The mob pummeled Isaac. He fell to the ground; he offered no struggle; the fates had cut the string of his existence. Isaac could only cover his head as the kicks battered him, as the spit blurred his eyes. Basil watched in fear. The beast had risen from its lair; he sought his victim. The man who had pulled Isaac into the town appeared from the shadows, clutching a rope. He fashioned a noose at one end. Paul snatched it jealously from him and wrapped it about Isaac's neck. Basil could stand no more. Basil ran into the mob.

Basil forgot his frailty, the weakness that coughed from his chest and fevered his head; he pulled the mob from Isaac and covered him. "Do not hurt this man. He has done you no wrong."

"This stranger asks us to free the demon. Shall we set Satan's claws again into England to feed death to our children? (Never!) We cannot and we shall not allow this demon to live." Paul spoke as he looked into Basil's eyes. Paul's own eyes burned with hate, hate for Basil who sought to steal his hold, his vice upon the hearts of the people. Paul rose fully and stared. The crowd screamed around him. "Kill the demon! Kill him! Kill him!" A blow struck Basil upon the cheek, spilling Basil's blood across his own face. Basil fell unconscious upon the ground.

Chapter V: The End, My Only Friend...

The leaves fluttered in the soft breeze that whisked through the town pass the bakery, the butcher shop, the homes that scattered the streets. The sun rose in the east; its soft morning light blanketed the sky in the morning of a new day. All was silent. No one walked the streets or had risen from their slumber. Basil lay alone in the dirt.

Basil opened his eyes; a ringing screamed in his ears as the pounding of blood throbbed into the bruise upon his cheek. He awoke. Basil slowly pulled himself to his knees, placing his hands in the dirt, coughing in weakness. He looked about him at his isolation, at the serenity of the scene, the silence of the village. Basil rose to his feet in an awkward, forced motion. He stumbled. His legs wobbled with the dizziness that welled in his head, with the pounding from the blow from the previous night. If not for the pain, if not for the bruise, Basil would have thought it had all been a dream. The town seemed so peaceful. Basil touched his cheek and cringed from the pain.

Basil began to walk, to flee. He hurried himself from this wicked place, from this place that had born so much evil the night before. He walked to the well. He turned the crank and raised the bucket. He splashed water in his face. As the water streamed across his eyes, across his bruised cheek, across his lips, he looked into the trees and fell to the ground, covering his eyes.

Aric hung from the tree; his eyes staring at Basil in horror, in the last gasps of life as his neck snapped. Had he plead for mercy? Had he begged for his life? Basil did not think such was true. Aric had known his fate upon his admission; he saw the hate in the town; he ventured for the water in desperation. Now he was a symbol to all, hanging by the well. Basil covered his eyes and sobbed.

"Damn you. Damn you all." Basil said as he rose to his feet and walked from this place of torment. Aric was the fortunate. He was dead. Basil must now wallow in the torment of his own weakness, of the hate of these townspeople. Basil walked away, looking back only once, residing to never return to this evil place, to never meet the beast again.

The town had wallowed in fear, in their own filth. Were their lives so important that they would sacrifice another's? The answer was yes. Like sharks in a bathtub of blood they submerged themselves in their frenzy, unwilling to open their eyes, unwilling to think or even feel. They knew fear. They knew hate. They frenzied upon the taste of fear and hate, tearing apart those who bled it into them. It only took a stranger. Beasts, they were all beasts, blind to the life that fluttered about them in the breeze; they knew only the primal drive of self, such beasts.

Basil walked from the morning until the evening, never stopping. Then again, from morning until evening, he walked until exhaustion submerged his eyes, his thoughts. At last a town that perhaps brought rest or perhaps torment. Basil only knew exhaustion and did not care which plate would be placed on the table in front of him.

"Sorry, friend. The town has forbidden strangers. This plague has done it you know." The man spoke from the side of the road. His face was pale; his skin was tightly stretched over his skull, making each bone of it, each curve visible to the eye.

"Then I will not enter. I have seen what fear may do."

"Have you. Well, I will escort you around. I know a rather short path; it will not take long out of your journey."

"I have nowhere to go, let it take a lifetime." Basil said as a smile crossed the man's purple lips.

The man wore a long black cloak, seemingly too large for his frail frame. The cloak wrapped tightly about him then fell loosely to the ground. Basil's own aspect seemed ragged, tattered. His clothes were soiled from the last evening's ritual. His eyes were bloody, his cheek bruised. He coughed.

"I am Charles, and you."

"Basil, I am only Basil."

"And what brings you to our gentle town?"

Basil laughed. "I am only passing by. I have had enough of towns, of people, of this horrid plague."

"We all have, I assure you."

"Not all." Basil looked at him as he spoke, pain staining his face, drawing out the bruise, offering his sorrow for all to see. His eyes could not hide it.

The sun was setting around them as they walked. The path chosen was sheltered by the trees. Charles looked to the ground longingly as they walked. Some answer lay there for him, some peace. He looked to it with anticipation, with the melancholy anticipation of the inevitable. Basil looked at the trees; he looked at the grass. Basil, in his pained and miserable guise, eyed the life of the world, its peace, its calm. Basil's pain had only splattered such calm with an effervescent light, a glow, a wondrous mist. The world of the trees, of the grass, seemed to become alive to him, to offer their peace. He longed for it, for some answer that he had not found. The plague had failed man. No one had understood. No one saw death and spat in his face. No one loved for mere love's

sake in the face of death. Death bred only jealousy, hate, and fear. What of life, then? Life only shook in fear. Death threw a veil over the eyes of all in this world of the plague, in this world of death. The skeletons clung to their flesh not knowing why. They only knew that the flesh should always be there. The flesh did not play or dance or love with the purity of life. No, the flesh only danced to forget, loved for jealous pleasure, and played only hide and seek from the inevitability of death.

"Yes, the town has lost many. They are all scared, friend. You seemed to have traveled far. Perhaps you are reaching the end." Charles smiled as spoke. His smile was calm, peaceful, reassuring.

"Perhaps." Basil began to cough a pained, deep cough from the depths of his chest.

"Sick, friend?"

"Yes, I have spent many days walking now and many nights in the rain. It will pass."

"Perhaps."

The walk came easily to Basil. His feet lost their weight. His eyes lost the clouds that had hung over them for so long. The trees began to clear from the path; they became sparse and then scattered into nothing.

"Well, friend, this is as far I go. We have passed the town. Peace to you."

"And you."

Basil walked away, turning once to wave as Charles returned to his post outside of the town, away from the people, away from the fear. Basil again began his aimless

walk. He had nothing left. Basil's family, hopes, dreams, and love had been torn from him by the plague, by the fear of the plague. Basil had nothing.

"Good plague, where is your truth? Perhaps I will never know it."

Basil followed the path into the clearing and then into a great woods. The woods swelled around him, filled with the singing of birds and the gentle calm of the trees. The sky at last fell into slumber, into night. The moon became the only light; it penetrated the trees, shining upon Basil, shining on the leaves, on the birds as they nestled one another upon the limbs. Basil smiled. Basil coughed.

"Tonight I will sleep here." Basil said to himself.

He walked from the path into the deepest depths of the trees, away from the path, away from man, away from the fear. The moon shone in the sky, lighting his path. At last, in the midst of the woods Basil fell to his knees in exhaustion and slowly slid his back against a tree. He let out an exhalation of calm, of the end of exertion. He exhaled his worries and settled himself for the night.

Basil's eyes flashed open with the sharp knife of pain being stabbed into his chest. He coughed. He coughed furiously. The pain pulled his head between his knees. He tried to spit out the pain, to spew the agony upon the ground in front of him. It was red. Basil's face paled into a pure white, the white of horror. He saw his life upon the ground; his blood spilt upon the blades of grass.

"This cannot be, just a cold from the rain, just a sickness from the rain."

Tears spilt from Basil's eyes. He tore his shirt open. Basil's chest was stained with black as the invisible knife stabbed into his chest, spilling his blood into his skin.

The black upon his chest, under his arms, was his blood being torn from his flesh. The blood erupted from his veins, out of their natural paths, and onto the once pale skin.

"This cannot be."

Basil eyes blurred from his tears. He was now the victim. The plague was slowly cutting him apart. Death's sickle slowly dug into his chest, reaping his life.

"This cannot be. Why? I loved all. I loved."

Basil's head swam from thought to dream and back to thought as his head filled with the fever of pain. Basil's eyes became shrouded into a veil, a veil that clouded his senses and blanketed his head from the light of the world. He slowly rolled to his side, sobbing. The pain forced into his flesh; he was helpless. A cold? A sickness? No, the plague had found him as he wandered, hunted him as he sought. The plague came to him in his weakness, in his despair.

"Plague, perhaps it is fitting."

Basil's eyes rose from their gaze upon the grass. They rose to look about the world around him. He had never understood. He had never comprehended the world as it pulsed around him. He had only looked for purity, purity in love and hope, purity in the joy for life. He had only found death. His eyes followed the moon's light where the leaves of the trees became sparse, allowing it its full gaze.

Distant from him, beneath a tree, lay a boar. It was dead. It lay in the moonlight, shining in the full light of the night's celestial brilliance. Basil could now smell the blood. The boar's blood lay spilt; its stomach was torn open. He could smell the blood. He smelled the life as it escaped into the air, into the ground that it had spilt upon. Basil's head fevered into delusion as he looked. The boar lay in a bed of flowers.

The flowers rose from the ground upon their stems, a deep green in the moon's light. The petals opened into great buds of a pure white, almost pale but too vibrant to be. The flowers almost submerged the animal as it lay in peace. As it weakened, lost its strength, melted into nothing, the flowers rose in the clean spring air, into the spring world, into the world of the new.

The world was being born again. Basil looked about him, at the trees budding their newborn leaves, at the grass as it rose from the earth, at the flowers as they blossomed in the moon's light. All was new. All was fresh. A purity settled into the scene, the purity of the newborn. Hanging about the air was the smell of the boar's bled, lying dead amongst so much life. Its hair was matted with its own blood. Somehow, it seemed aged, old, as if death had come at its chosen time, this time of rebirth.

Basil stared at the boar. He looked to the flowers, open and pure. He laughed. He laughed as the fever filled his head, as the pain stabbed his chest; it seemed to dull into a distant and lost feeling. Basil's body was leaving him; he was left only with thought. His head slipped into dreams, into answers that he had always known but never realized. He looked to the boar, to the flowers; he laughed. Basil laughed until his eyes became still, until his breath was only an exhale.

Epilogue

A man walked through the woods, quickly then slowly, upon his toes. His eyes darted about him in quick, ecstatic motions. He saw someone lying in the grass. He slumped to the ground and crawled to the man.

"I see you. I can see you, uncle. Have you come to see me? Have you come to see poor Gregory?"

He crawled to the man lying dead. Basil lay upon his back; his long black hair fell softly around his head; his pale face was white and beautiful in the stillness of death.

"Oh, a napping boy you are uncle. A napping boy! Tell me. Tell me uncle. Tell me why have you come."

Basil had torn the grass around him, lifted the fresh spring shoots from their soil, tore them from the earth. They now lay in a circle about him, smoothly encasing him. His hand had fell to the ground above his head as he died, pointing.

"Is it time, uncle? Six o'clock it seems to me. Well, be silent if you like. Gregory will sit here, sit here until you speak.

The man's eyes followed the hand and looked to the boar in the flowers. The flowers sparkled in the moonlight while the boar seemed lost in the shadows, lost to the light that fell upon the whole of the earth. The flowers drank it as they rose.

"Oh, uncle, just that? Oh, was it only that? Well, I'll tell them for you. Gregory will tell them what uncle told him. You stay; you sleep. Gregory will tell them!"

The man walked into the shadows.